Letter of expert opinion

Professor Tom Licence, MA, MPhil, PhD, FHEA, FRHistS, FSA
Professor of Medieval History, University of East Anglia
Senior Research Fellow, Magdalene College, Cambridge

I write at the request of the petitioners with specific reference to their statement in A140, that 'Edgar the Aetheling was created an Earl by William I'.

To begin with, I will present additional evidence, and an argument of my own:

The earliest source touching on the matter of William I's treatment of Edgar is the *Carmen de Hæstingæ proelio* ('Song of the Battle of Hastings'), written in 1067/8 by Bishop Guy of Amiens. Guy claims that when William invaded England (in late September 1066), he sent a messenger to King Harold, offering to grant him the lands his (Harold's) father had held in return for renouncing the throne and recognising William as king. The 'lands his father had held' ('terram quam pridem tenuit pater', cited from Barlow's edition of the *Carmen*, p. 16), refers to the earldom of Wessex.

Thus, we have it on the evidence of the well-informed observer, Guy, who was chaplain to William's queen, and writing within a year or two of the conquest, that William was the sort of man who might offer – and who was believed to have offered – an earldom as recompense to a king for renouncing the throne.

A few months later, William was in a similar position of wishing to persuade another king to renounce the throne. The king now was Edgar Aetheling. The petitioners are entirely correct, that the English had established him upon the throne in October or November. The *Carmen* (p. 38) indicates that Edgar had been elected ('electus'), and crowned ('in regem sacrent'), and that the news went out that London had a king ('sparsit fama volens quod habet Lundoniam regem'). William of Poitiers, who employed the *Carmen* as a source for his *Gesta Guillelmi* ('Deeds of William [the Conqueror]') in the 1070s, read the passage to mean as much, and wrote that the English 'instated King Edgar Aetheling' ('regem statuerant', p. 147, citing Davis and Chibnall's edition). Further confirmation comes in the fact that the monks of Peterborough sent Brand, their abbot-elect, to Edgar, for his royal confirmation as their abbot (referenced in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle E text annal for 1066).

After his victory over Harold at Hastings on 14 October 1066, William took a round-about route to London, before preparing to besiege the city, where the new king, Edgar, and the leading men were holding out. Preferring to avoid bloodshed, William initiated negotiations. These are mentioned in our early sources, the *Carmen* and the *Gesta Guillelmi*. The negotiations were – from William's perspective – a success, resulting in the submission of the leading men, and in Edgar renouncing his kingship in recognition of William's title. While the *Carmen* says nothing of the inducements which William offered, William of Poitiers, in the *Gesta Guillelmi* (p. 162), states that he endowed Edgar Aetheling with 'sizeable lands' ('amplis terris ditavit' - with *amplus* having the sense of 'extensive'/ 'important'/ 'honourable', and *dito* having 'enriched' as its meaning).

Given that William had thought – or was believed to have thought – that an earldom was suitable recompense for a king with whom he was negotiating earlier that year, it is highly likely that he would have offered King Edgar a similar inducement to renounce his royal title. Indeed, I think it unlikely that William would have offered him anything *less* than an earldom, for Edgar's royal title and the support which he enjoyed were equal to nothing less, and William was faced with the unhappy alternative of besieging London in the winter – something he would have gone to great lengths to avoid.

As mentioned above, William of Poitiers claims that William recompensed Edgar with 'sizeable lands' – a statement which reinforces the idea that his reward was an earldom. While it might be objected that he does not *call* the reward an earldom, his reference to sizeable lands is comparable to the one which I cited earlier from the *Carmen*, in which 'the lands his [i.e. Harold's] father had held' can only refer to

the earldom of Wessex. From this example, there is clear evidence that a continental writer could conceive of an English earldom in terms of lands, rather than in terms of offices and titles to which comital lands attached. It is therefore not a concern that William of Poitiers makes no specific mention of Edgar's reward having been an earldom.

I further note that William was content to let the existing earls keep the title *Earl* and the lands attached to their offices, and that this approach would be compatible to him either confirming Edgar in such a role or granting him a comital (i.e. an earl's) title as recompense for relinquishing his royal office.

On this evidence, I consider the balance of probabilities to be that the Norman duke (and later king) William offered Edgar an earldom in 1066 and made him earl either at the end of 1066 or early in 1067.

I will now comment briefly on certain aspects of the evidence adduced in the petition, starting with the Domesday evidence:

If, as I think most likely, Edgar was granted an earldom in 1066/7, then by his rebellion in 1068 or 1069, that earldom would have fallen forfeit. Domesday Book captures evidence of who held lands and titles at two moments in time: first, near the end of 1065 in the reign of King Edward (TRE - Tempus regis Eadwardi), and second, in 1086 (TRE – Tempus regis Willelmi), at the time Domesday was compiled. It would therefore not be expected that a man who obtained an earldom in 1066 and lost it in c. 1068 would appear as an earl in Domesday Book. The landholder named as *Comes Edgarus* ('Earl Edgar') in Great Chesterford, Essex, is thought by modern experts, to represent Ælfgar, another earl, whose abundant holdings were posthumously recorded. This is certainly the view of Stephen Baxter and Chris Lewis, who are the editors of *Domesday PASE* (the online Domesday prosopography database), which is a better-grounded study than most interpretation that has gone before. It is not necessary for Edgar to appear in Domesday Book for this petition to make a credible case.

In my opinion, it is more likely that Edgar, having been an earl, would not show up in Domesday Book. If, however, he does, then the case is clinched regardless of the argument which I put forward.

Secondly, it is evident that certain authorities of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries believed that Edgar was created earl of Oxford. Their opinion merits consideration, as it is, on the whole, unlikely that such an idea would arise out of nowhere, and it must be allowed that those authorities may have consulted sources that are unknown to us, having been lost in the intervening centuries.

In Appendix 2 of his study of the earls of Mercia, Stephen Baxter, who is the lead expert on the earldom, demonstrates the extent of the uncertainty around who held the earl's office in Oxfordshire after the death of Earl Ralph in 1057. There is writ evidence that Harold's brother Gurth was earl there in 1065, but Gurth died in the battle of Hastings (14 October 1066), creating a vacancy (if indeed he had been earl in Oxfordshire). The previous incumbent, Ralph, had been Edward the Confessor's nephew. It is conceivable that the positioning of Edward's late *nephew* in Oxfordshire might have been a factor in determining which honour to grant to Edward's *great nephew* Edgar - and that the shire of Oxfordshire was considered to be suitable for him for that reason. There is no contemporary evidence that Edgar's earldom centred on Oxfordshire, but the weight of antiquarian testimony, coupled with the reasoning presented above, tends more in that direction than any other.

In conclusion, I find in favour of the petitioners' statement that, on balance of probabilities, Edgar the Aetheling was created an Earl by William I, though I arrive at that conclusion largely by independent arguments, as set out above.

Tom Licence
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